The Effect of Track Position on Absenteeism*

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Abstract. Absenteeism is one of the major problems facing America’s schools. Absenteeism disrupts the learning environment, is related to lower levels of achievement, and is associated with problems of crime and delinquency. While previous research has identified many of the determinants of absenteeism, the role of a student’s position in the tracking structure within a school has not been explored. The purpose of this paper is to explore this relationship. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results reveal that students who are in the lower tracks within the tracking structure in a school are more likely to be absent than other students and that Black and female students in low tracks are more adversely affected by the low-track environment that non-Black and male students. These results suggest that track position must be taken into consideration when dealing with the problem of absenteeism.

Introduction

One of the major problems facing America’s schools is that of absenteeism. During the 1970s, average daily attendance for New York high schools was between 50 and 70% (Birman & Natriello, 1978). During the 1980s, 20% of the students in the Boston middle schools were absent more than 15% of the time, and 5% of the students were more absent than 50% of the time (Wehlage et al., 1989). A study of youth in an alternative school program found that students were absent an average of 1.15 days a week (Kronick & Hargis, 1990).

High absenteeism rates are problematic at the individual, school, and societal levels. At the individual level, high absenteeism rates are related to lower levels of achievement and lead to difficulties in acquiring credentials. High rates of absenteeism reduce the amount of schooling time a student receives and also cause a disruption in the learning sequence (Monk & Ibrahim, 1984). Students who attend class on a regular basis may also be adversely affected by students with high rates of absenteeism since teachers may have to take class time to provide remedial help for the absent students (Monk & Ibrahim, 1984).

Absenteeism can hurt a student’s chances of future occupational success by preventing the student from obtaining needed credentials (Birman & Natriello, 1978).

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Students who do not obtain the credentials needed to be successful in the job market may be unemployed or earn less when they are employed (Natriello, 1994).

Absenteeism can also create problems at the school level. Since the school is required by law to educate all young people, high rates of absenteeism may threaten the school's legitimacy. High absenteeism rates can also affect the amount of funding a school receives since the size of a school's budget is often based on attendance rates (Birman & Natriello, 1978).

High rates of absenteeism are also problematic at the societal level. Crime and delinquency become problems when a large number of adolescents are not in school (Birman & Natriello, 1978). Another problem is created when these students "fail to acquire the basic competencies necessary for productive adult life." Limited success in the job market may also lead to a dependency on governmental services, such as welfare and health care assistance, in order to survive (Natriello, 1994).

In order to deal effectively with the problems associated with high absenteeism rates, research has been done to explore the determinants of absenteeism. The results of these studies have shown that both student characteristics and school characteristics are associated with high rates of absenteeism.

Most of the previous research on absenteeism has focused on student characteristics. Studies have shown that socioeconomic status (SES), family background characteristics, and other student background characteristics are related to absenteeism. Those students most likely to be absent are low-SES students, students from single-parent families, and students from households that have few educational resources (Natriello, 1994). Students who are behind in grade level - therefore older than their classmates - are more likely to be absent than those in the appropriate grade (Hahn, 1987). Studies have reported inconsistent results in regard to the effects of race, ethnicity, and gender on absenteeism.

Students with high rates of absenteeism also exhibit different attitudes and behaviors in school than those students with low absenteeism rates. Their school performance is poorer, and they have lower self-esteem, more discipline problems, and fewer positive relationships with peers and adults (Natriello, 1994).

Recent research has shown that school characteristics also affect absenteeism. The internal organizational features of schools can have a significant impact on absenteeism rates. Bryk and Thum (1989) found that, after controlling for student background characteristics, the rate of absenteeism in Catholic schools is approximately a third less than it is in public schools. They also discovered that absenteeism is higher in schools where there is a greater incidence of discipline problems, and lower in schools where students feel they are safe, perceive discipline to be fair and effective, and where there is a strong press toward doing homework and getting good grades. Absenteeism is lower in schools where there is an interest in academics and a concentration of students in academic pursuits and where internal curricular diversity and social class diversity are low. Absenteeism is also higher in larger schools (see also, Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).